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ABSTRACT

This qualitative research paper reports on Latina students in single-gender and coeducational secondary-level special education placements for students with mild to moderate learning disabilities. Classroom observations and interviews were conducted with nine Latina special education students. All participants were in their first, second, or third year of the program and ranged from 15 to 18 years of age. With the exception of one participant, all students lived in low-income neighborhoods. Six students were from single-parent families and five reported that at least one parent did not graduate from high school. In addition to the students, two special education teachers and high school administrators involved in the implementation of the single-gender and mixed-gender special education program were interviewed as informants to verify data collected from student participants. In comparison with Latina students attending a coed special education classroom, students in the single-gender special education classroom reported increased comfort level, school attendance, and improved attitudes toward school. Students in the single-gender special education classroom generally reported positive relationships with same-sex peers in class and commented repeatedly about the freedom they felt to discuss personal issues, ask questions, participate in class, and to do classroom presentations. (Contains 33 references.) (Author/CR)

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The Intersection of Gender, Race, and Disability: Latina Students in Special Education

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The Latina Voice in Special Education: Student Attitudes, Perceptions, and Experiences in Single-Gender and Coeducational Classrooms

Abstract

This qualitative research was designed to give voice to Latina students in single-gender and coeducational secondary-level special education placements for students with mild to moderate learning disabilities. Classrooms observations and interviews were conducted with Latina special education students, classroom teachers, and program administrators in both single-gender and coeducational special education classrooms on one urban school site serving a large special education population. In comparison to Latina students attending a coed special education classroom, students in the single-gender special education classroom reported increased comfort level, school attendance, and improved attitudes toward school.

The Latina Voice in Special Education: Student Attitudes, Perceptions, and Experiences in Single-Gender and Coeducational Classrooms

By the year 2030, the Latino population is expected to reach 59 million and will become the largest ethnic minority group in the United States. The Latino community faces unique struggles and risks in relationship to school. Factors such as frequent absences and residential changes, and limited English language fluency contribute to this situation (Ginorio & Huston, 2001; Portillo & Segura, 1996). Approximately 26 percent percent of students with disabilities will leave high school before graduation (U.S. Department of Education, 1997). With the exception of Asian Americans, minority students in special education leave school with greater frequency than White students. Latino students are considered to be at the highest risk for dropping out (Pitsch, 1991). Further, when Latino students drop out of school, they tend to stay out (American Association of University Women, 1998; Romo, 1998; U.S. Department of Education, 2000).

Latina students in special education have the highest dropout rate for any group of girls; approximately one out of every five Latina students leave school before the age of 17 (Schnaiberg, 1998). In some urban and rural areas, 56 percent of Latina students leave school before graduation (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1999). The teen pregnancy and birth rates of Latinas have not followed the decline of African-American and White rates (Association of University Women, 1998; Ginorio & Huston, 2001; Portner, 1998).

The percentage of dropouts, prior to high school graduation, in special education by gender is 50.4 percent female and 49.6 percent male (McMillan, 1997), but these rates are deceptive because of the disproportionate number of boys in special education. Boys are six times more likely than girls to be diagnosed with learning disabilities (LD) (Association of University Women, 1992; Epstein, Cullinan, & Bursuck, 1985). The disproportionate number of boys identified as LD has resulted in special education classes in which boys outnumber girls by startling percentages. In special education classrooms where boys consistently outnumber girls, girls take fewer risks and perform less proficiently than boys (Grossman, 1998). Textbooks and curricula reinforce sex-role stereotypes, and co-educational gender-biased classrooms reduce the confidence levels of girls (Grossman, 1998; Rogers & Gilligan, 1998).

Efforts to retain female special education students, particularly Latina students, have not been successful. Recently, a growing body of literature has documented the benefits of single-sex schooling in the general education setting. Further, the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) contains a provision that authorizes local education agencies to use educational funds to implement single-gender programs. Single-sex education has been proposed as a means of addressing the needs of at-risk students (Datnow, Hubbard & Woody, 2001; Datnow, Hubbard, & Conchas, 2001; Datnow & Hubbard, 2000; Hubbard & Datnow, 2000; Streitmatter, 1997; 1999). The issue of single-gender education, however, has not been examined in special education. Research in special education rarely focuses on gender issues. Streitmatter (1999), in a qualitative study of single-sex programs nationwide, happened to include a classroom of girls identified for special education. The

class was an integrated math and algebra course that was team taught by one general educator and one special educator. Her research provides some evidence that special education girls benefited in the areas of self-confidence and risk-taking. More importantly, interviews with the girls yielded compelling insights into their changed perceptions as learners. There was consensus that, without the presence of boys in the classroom, girls were more focused on content and their learning experiences were heightened (Streitmatter, 1997; 1999).

The lack of research and programs focusing on the needs of girls, particularly Latinas, in special education places them at risk for failure and for dropping out of school (American Association of University Women, 1998). While efforts to improve the services provided to students of culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds have been made (Baca, Fradd & Collier, 1990; Guillory, 2000; Romo & Falbo, 1996) solutions must continue to be explored to address this growing problem of the Latina drop out rate in special education. Single-gender environments may provide one viable option to encourage school continuance for Latina students in special education. Through qualitative research methodology, the present study sought to give voice to Latina students in single-gender and coeducational special education placements.

Method

Sample

The participants for this study were nine Latina special education students who attended single-gender and mixed-gender special education classrooms; all participants were in their first, second, or third year of the program, (freshman to junior year of high

school). Ages ranged from 15 to 18 years. Six of nine Latina participants reported that Spanish was the primary language spoken at home; the other participants spoke only English at home. Of the six Latina students who spoke Spanish at home, four were born in Mexico, one was born in El Salvador, and one was born in California. With the exception of one participant, all students lived in low income neighborhoods. Six students were from single-parent families and five students reported that either one or both parents did not graduate from high school. In addition to the students, two special education teachers (one male coed classroom teacher, one female single-gender classroom teacher), and high school administrators involved in the implementation of the single-gender and mixed-gender special education program were interviewed as informants to verify and triangulate data collected from student participants. The study was conducted on the campus of a public coeducational high school located in an urban center in northern California. The high school was one of seven in the district and had the largest special education program district-wide.

Procedure

A qualitative research approach was used to investigate the impact of single-gender special day classrooms on Latina high school students identified as learning disabled in one urban school district in northern California. The study used classroom observations, focus- group interviews, and individual interviews to gather information on the impact of the single-gender and mixed-gender programs. In addition, class assignments, homework, and other classroom documents were collected. Female special day class students, teachers, and program administrators of single-gender and mixed-gender special

day classrooms were interviewed. Open-ended and semi-structured questionnaires developed by single-gender program researchers at Johns Hopkins University were used for the interview protocols (Datnow, Hubbard & Woody, 2001). Transcription allowed content analysis of the interviews to be used for developing generalized themes that addressed the research questions. Follow-up individual interviews with the students were conducted at a later date as a method for member checking and to further explore emergent themes (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Latina students from single-gender and mixed-gender special day classrooms were interviewed in homogeneous (single-gender or mixed-gender) focus groups. Students were interviewed in groups of three to four participants. A transcription from each interview was generated to record the responses. Interview questions addressed the research questions pertaining to the school attitudes of students. We also conducted individual interviews with students to clarify information collected from the initial focus group interviews.

Observations

Over the span of four months, we observed in both mixed-gender and single-gender classrooms two days a week (four hours per visit) as a participant/observer resulting in more than 25 classroom observations. In addition to instructional time, the observations included lunchtime, breaks, and before- and after-school interactions. The purpose of the observations was three-fold; to establish rapport and help build relationships with the students and classroom teachers; to observe interactions on two

levels: student-to-student interactions and student-to-teacher interactions; and to observe the classroom behaviors and attitudes of the students.

Data Analysis

The transcribed interviews, field notes, and documents were organized according to dates, place setting, and individual and focus group interviews. We reviewed the data to get a sense of the overall picture emerging from the various information sources. The transcribed data from the individual and focus group interviews were coded according to the emergent themes that arose from the focus groups and individual interviews. The notes and data collected from the classroom observations were transcribed to provide information related to the classroom behaviors and school attitudes of the students, and were also coded thematically.

Detailed descriptions and in-depth quotations were included to provide understanding and insights into the themes that arose throughout the data analysis process. We looked for quotations and observations that fit together to highlight a particular theme, issue, or idea. The data were labeled and indexed to organize the material into meaningful and manageable categories. Questions that developed from the transcribed reports were presented to students in an interview format to verify data previously collected.

Results

The interview data were organized into three categories related to students' attitudes toward school (See Figure 1). School attitudes were measured by general affective statements indicating positive or negative feelings toward school reported in

focus group and individual interviews. School attitudes included relationships among students, teachers, and peers, student attitudes about academics, student perceptions of the school environment, and student perceptions of gender and identity.

Attitudes of students in the single-gender and coed classes were compared according to specific categories and themes. Figure 1 provides an overview of the separate categories and themes that were content analyzed.

Figure 1: School Attitudes by Category and Theme: Single Gender/Coed Classroom

I. Relationships	II. Academics	III. Perceptions
1. Student: Peers	1. School Attendance	1. Comfort / Distractions
2. Student: Teachers	2. Grades	2. Gender / Ethnicity

Category I: Relationships

Peer Relationships

Several trends emerged from the interviews with students in the single-gender special education classroom. Students generally reported positive relationships with same-sex peers in class. They commented repeatedly about the freedom they felt to discuss personal issues, and the lack of inhibition they felt to ask questions, to participate in class, and to stand up during presentations in front of their female peers. As one student explained, "You can talk about more personal stuff, and you don't have to worry

about guys teasing you and you are more free. I used to be scared to read in front of guys, now I am not afraid."

This was a contrast to the descriptions of students' previous experiences in coed environments. The students in the single-gender class reported feeling very intimidated in coed environments. When attending coed classes, students were afraid to ask questions for fear of being ridiculed by male peers and were reluctant to participate in class discussions. The company of all female peers was described as being comfortable and safe. Two Latina students reported feeling "shy" in front of male students for two reasons: the fear of being laughed at and teased and the fear of not fluently speaking English. This fear was heightened by the fact that these students were in classes in which they were outnumbered by boys. Latina students reported feeling at ease in the single-gender class. As one Latina student in the single-gender class stated:

> They'll (boys) talk about us, pass notes, sometimes make you feel uncomfortable,
> say little stupid slurs, like sexual, or something negative, or put you down saying you're dumb or something like that… in a special ed class with both genders, I never felt comfortable with it. I felt I should keep quiet, just so nobody would pass judgment on me. But in here we're all the same sex, we all understand what we're going through. I can express my feelings, nobody's shy, everybody is friends, so I like it, it's better.

Several students in the single-gender class commented about the benefits of mainstreaming for two or more classes as an opportunity to interact with male peers. Students agreed that they missed the company of boys, however, most students agreed that the time spent in the single-gender classroom was the most productive and enjoyable in terms of relationships.

Student-Teacher Relationships

Single-gender and coed classroom students made a clear distinction between relationships with male and female teachers. Seven of nine Latina students interviewed indicated a preference for female teachers for three reasons: 1) students receive more attention from a female teacher in class, 2) students are not afraid to ask for help from a female teacher, and 3) students feel more comfortable talking about personal issues with a female teacher.

Overall, Latina students in the single-gender classroom reported getting along better with female teachers and felt that male teachers did not understand their specific needs in the classroom. One student explained: "If you have a problem, like a girl problem, you're not going to tell the male teacher. He's going to say 'Oh yeah, you need a female to help you with this problem'..... It's better with a female (teacher)."

The coed classroom students agreed with this sentiment and indicated that they did not feel they had much in common with their male teachers.

Category II: Academics

Attendance and Grades

Students in the single-gender special day classroom reported improved attendance compared to previous years in coed classes. This information is verified by the single-gender classroom teacher.

> Single-gender Class Teacher: The main goal is to graduate them, to get them through high school. There are little personal goals within that .... that they have self-confidence and that they are attending school regularly....but the main objective is to get them to graduate high school and to pass their exams.

Researcher: So the single gender program is seen as a way to accomplish that?

Single-gender Class Teacher: Absolutely, especially in attendance because before they weren't attending school, and now I think I had maybe just a few truancy letters that went out, but before it was a lot of truancy letters, so I'm not as concerned with attendance now; it was a real concern before (The teacher had previously taught in a coed special education class on the same campus).

One Latina student in the single-gender classroom described her attendance patterns, "I used to be absent because I didn't like going to my classes. I mean, I didn't see the point if I'm going to be failing. Now I come more."

Teacher records, and teacher and student interviews indicate that, overall, attendance is higher for female students in the single-gender classroom compared with their counterparts in the coed classrooms. Student grades and attitude toward school work revealed similar patterns to the rate of attendance for girls in the single-gender class. Teacher grade books, and teacher and student interviews demonstrated a p ive trend in school attitude, grade point average, and performance in Latina single-gen classroom students as evidenced in the following comments, "My grades are going up now, because usually I used to get an F in English and I used to flunk Math. In here, nobody messes around." Another student describes her progress, "I'm actually doing way better than I was. I was failing some of my classes, they were getting too hard for me, and I just couldn't keep up with my work."

Attendance for female students in the coed class was a serious problem. During the twelve-week period of data collection, the Latina students were frequently absent during observations, and one Latina was on probation for truancy. One Latina student was eventually expelled from class for truancy and referred to a continuation high school.

According to the coed classroom teacher, lack of attendance is the greatest obstacle for Latina students achieving high school graduation.

Category III: Perceptions

Comfort Level / Distractions

Students in the single-gender special day class commented repeatedly on the degree of comfort they experienced in the all-female environment. In two focus groups with single-gender classroom students, this theme emerged consistently. This perception is reflected in the comment of one Latina student, "It's comfortable to be in here. You get a lot of help in here; you just feel good being here."

Students in the coed class, on the other hand, expressed feeling tense and guarded. It seemed that the coed classroom students experienced the environment in terms of "us and them;" the girls felt they had to defend themselves against the boys' harassment. In the words of one Latina student, "They (the boys) just act dumb, like they always talk about girls. They ask you stupid questions like, 'Oh have you got your period' or 'Damn she's big.'"

The coed teacher viewed the girls as tough and able to stand up to the boys. He explained, "If a girl can come into my class, she can hold her own. She can probably beat up half the boys." This viewpoint, however, contradicts the perceptions of the girls. As one Latina student reported, "They (the boys) feel overpowering. They feel that they have power over us because they are boys and there are more of them." Another Latina student expressed frustration at not being heard or respected for her opinions. "A lot of

time I want to tell them something, but if I do, they don't listen to me. It's just, "Damn, why don't you just shut up. They want to hear their own voices instead of other people"

Distractibility was another recurrent theme for girls in the single-gender and coed classes. Girls in the single-gender and coed classes perceived themselves as motivated to stay on task and focus on schoolwork while in class. The girls in both classrooms expressed frustration and discomfort with the continuous teasing from boys. It appeared that girls were not distracted by the presence of boys in the classroom; rather the boys' behaviors towards them created a struggle for the girls to remain focused.

> Researcher: What kinds of things would boys do that were distracting?
>
> Latina Single-Gender Class Student: They'll talk about us, pass notes, sometimes make you feel uncomfortable, say little stupid slurs, sexual, or something negative, or put you down saying you're dumb..... in a special ed. class with both genders, I never felt comfortable. I just felt I should keep quiet, just so nobody would pass judgment on me. But in here we're all the same sex, we all understand what we're going through. I can express my feelings, nobody's shy, everybody's friends, so I like it, it's better.

The girls in the coed class had a similar experience as reflected in one Latina student's comments, "They (the boys) are always talking across (the room). They just talk because they have a mouth, but when you tell them be quiet, they won't. They'll just get louder and louder."

Gender / Race

The discussion of perceptions and attitudes toward gender and race raised a new discussion of challenges and stereotypes facing Latina students. Students articulated awareness of societal perceptions regarding their gender in relationship to race.

> Latina Single-gender Student: For us Latinas, when we're having problems, we

just drop out of school.

Latina Single-gender Student: Some people say "I won't drop out," but they still do.

Latina Single-gender Class Student: I like being a Latina, but in a way I don't, because maybe people are going to say "She might be in a gang" ...

Latina Single-gender Class Student: Just by looking at us they think we're gang members. Just because we're Latina .... you need to get to know a person before you start judging them.

This dialog reveals the complex nature of the experiences of Latina students. Furthermore, their perceptions of gender and ethnicity are reinforced by stereotypical and sexist attitudes as revealed in the following statements made by the coed classroom teacher:

Coed Class Teacher: It might be stereotyping, but Latino girls wear different makeup, unbelievably sexy outfits, as though they're ready to lay down on the floor and have sex right then and there.... All the girls (Latinas), I think, want to have babies, and lead their family to a better life. They are miserable at home and can't do what they want .... we're talking 14 and 15 years old.

Effects of Single-Gender Education

Single-gender special education was viewed overall as an affirming and positive experience for Latina students in a safe and comfortable environment. In comparison to Latina students attending a coed special education classroom, students in the single-gender special education classroom reported increased school attendance, higher grades, and improved attitudes toward school. These self-reports are confirmed by teachers and program administrators, as well as teacher records. Coed classroom Latina students, on the other hand, reported lower attendance, and higher incidences of truancy. This information is verified by teachers and administrators, and teacher records.

Support from teachers and parents was another important benefit of single-gender classroom attendance. This particular group of students reported very strong support from home and school, as reflected in one student's words, "My parents are supporting me 100 percent, they're right there with me. They want me to go to college."

Latina students attending the single-gender special education classroom appeared to be advantaged in single-sex environments compared to their counterparts in the coed classroom. Latina single-gender classroom students interacted in class with greater frequency, attended school more often, and experienced greater academic success than the Latina students attending the coed classroom. Single-gender environments appear to be empowering for Latina students for three reasons: the absence of boys gives them more confidence to speak out and participate, the single-gender environment is less distracting, and the Latina students report feeling greater support from teachers and parents.

Overarching Themes in Single-Gender and Coeducational Special Education

Student-Teacher Connections

Overall, single-gender classroom students reported favorable experiences with female teachers in single-gender classes and positive relationships with their peers. Girls in the coed classroom did not feel they had much in common with their male teacher, and as a result of this perception, they generally preferred a female teacher. Datnow, Hubbard, and Woody (2001), however, suggest that when teachers share similar background experiences with their students, the impact transcends the common bond of gender and race. Datnow, et al. (2001) argue that the teachers' ability to relate to the experiences of their students and teacher-student rapport has the greatest influence on

students. Furthermore, in their study of single-gender academies, the researchers found that gender match between students and teachers was not a sufficient explanation of teacher effectiveness. Overall, Datnow and colleagues found that regardless of gender, students and teachers in single-sex classrooms engaged in more meaningful conversations, and that more of these dialogs took place with female teachers in all female classes.

The research of Datnow, Hubbard, and Woody (2001) illuminates the findings of this study. The female teacher in the single-gender classroom shared a common bond with her students in terms of life experiences. She is married to a Latino and had a child at a young age. She has great empathy for her students and advocates for them in every way. The male coed classroom teacher, on the other hand, had little in common with his female students. He felt better able to relate to male students and often sided with his male students when gender differences arose in class, which further alienated the female students. It is not surprising that, in this study, Latina students in single-gender special education classrooms experienced a greater degree of positive relationships with the teacher and their peers. This positive finding, however, cannot be attributed solely to the gender of the teacher, but to a range of teacher characteristics.

Ginorio and Huston (2001) associate high achievement in school of Latina students with a high degree of personal connections with teachers. A report from the San Diego City Schools on high-achieving and low-achieving Latina students connected high "personalism," or strong personal connections between teachers and students, as directly related to the success of Latina students in school (San Diego City Schools, 1989).

Academic Attitudes

In this study, academic attitudes were evidenced in school attendance and grades of students in single-gender and coed classrooms. Teacher records and student interviews indicated that students attending the single-gender classroom had markedly higher attendance rates and grades than their coed class counterparts. Truancy and academic failure is a chronic problem for girls attending the coed special education class. According to one program administrator, this issue was the initial reason for the start up of the single-gender program on the research site.

Increased academic achievement is not a new phenomenon for girls attending single-gender schools, particularly for ethnically diverse female students in urban schools. Riordan (1994) conducted research examining the outcomes of ethnic group differences, in the context of single-gender settings compared to coeducational schools. The study yielded statistically significant results for Latina and African-American girls. Latina and African-American girls attending single-gender schools scored higher on measures of leadership and academic achievement than their counterparts in coeducational schools (Riordan, 1994).

The goal of the single-gender program on the research site was to address the specific problems of girls in the special education program. The positive effects on school attendance and academic achievement have been documented and the program has continued to yield successful results for the female students in single-gender classrooms. The girls in the coed classrooms continue to suffer from low attendance and poor academic performance.

Distractions and Harassment

Distraction emerged as a major theme throughout this research. Students in single-gender and coed classes commented repeatedly on the increased distractions they experienced in the presence of boys. This distraction was portrayed by the girls as unwanted and disliked. They described being harassed and picked on by boys when attempting to focus on schoolwork. Girls in the single-gender class appreciated the respite from males and preferred class without them. Girls in the coed class described the distractions from male peers as menacing and a source of frustration. Little was done on the part of the teacher to prevent these behaviors. Datnow, Hubbard, and Woody (2001) discuss the problem of male harassment of girls on an institutional level. They report that the female students in their study felt that teachers did little to stop the harassment, except to tell the girls to ignore the boys' behavior. In their study, girls in the single-gender academies reported a freedom from the distraction of the opposite sex, thereby allowing an opportunity for greater academic focus.

Classroom Climate

The students in the single-gender class remarked with consistency on the comfort level they experienced in their classroom. This finding is not surprising given the dynamics that take place between male and female students in coed special day classrooms. Coed classroom students felt very guarded in class for various reasons, including the need to defend themselves against the boys, and the lack of support and attentiveness to their needs from the male teacher. In the 1992 report by the American Association (AAUW) of University Women, *How Schools Shortchange Girls*, researchers reported that male students receive more positive and negative attention than

females from teachers in the classroom. This atmosphere places girls at risk for negligence, underachievement, and ultimately dropping out (AAUW, 1992). These findings are clearly reflected in the experiences of the coed special education classroom students in this present study.

Parental Support of Education

The role of parents in the school success of Latina students is multi-faceted and at times, misunderstood. In general, Latino parents place high value on their children's education and strongly support achievement in school (Huston, Ginorio, Frevert, & Bierman, 1996). Latino parents also have high expectations for their children to commit to family; which may sometimes be interpreted as a lack of commitment to education. To the contrary, Latino parents view academic achievement of their children as an opportunity for a better life with benefits for the whole family (Ginorio & Huston, 2001).

The role of teachers and parental support cannot be underestimated for Latina students, particularly Latinas in special education. The findings of this study suggest that single-gender special education classrooms provide distinct benefits for Latina students in terms of overall school success.

Implications for Special Education: Research and Practice

The small sample size and different genders and classroom teaching styles of the teachers in this study are clear limitations that require replication. A closer look at the complexities of gender and background experiences of educators is suggested by this study. Datnow, Hubbard, and Woody (2001) point out that while students in their study

agreed that it was important to have a teacher who was the same sex, teacher background played a vital role in the success of student teacher relationships. An important recommendation from this study would be for administrators to carefully consider background experiences of teachers, in conjunction with gender and ethnicity, when making decisions for the staffing of single-gender and coed special education classrooms.

The present study raises the question, "What is the impact of single-gender special education classrooms on Latina students considered to be at risk for dropping out of school?" The results of this investigation support the contention that Latina students need a high degree of support and personal connection with teachers, in addition to positive reinforcement, to achieve optimal school success (Ginorio & Huston, 2001; San Diego City Schools, 1989). Single-gender programs provide such environments for students who attend them (Datnow, Hubbard, & Woody, 2001; Streitmatter, 1999). Additionally, the role of parents plays an important part in the school achievement and attendance of Latina students (Ginorio & Huston, 2001). This study suggests that teachers and program administrators of Latina students in special education pay careful attention to the personal relationships they cultivate with their students and families. For Latina students, personal connections with teachers play a vital role in school success. In this study, single-gender special education classes provided such an opportunity for teachers.

Conclusion

The present study supports the notion that single-gender special education placements appear to be a viable option for Latina students to meet their complex and

diverse needs in special education. In light of the fact that female students in special education are largely understudied, it is critical that future research provides further examination along this line of inquiry. The issue of gender in relationship to race in special education has been long neglected in the literature. It is timely to continue scholarly efforts in this understudied area.

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